

Foster care children at much greater risk of physical, mental health problems

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Children who have been in the U.S. foster care system are at a significantly higher risk of mental and physical health problems - ranging from learning disabilities, developmental delays and depression to behavioral issues, asthma and obesity - than children who haven't been in foster care, according to a University of California, Irvine sociologist.

"No previous research has considered how the mental and physical well-being of children who have spent time in foster care compares to that of children in the general population," said study co-author Kristin Turney, UCI associate professor of sociology. "This work makes an important contribution to the research community by showing for the first time that foster care children are in considerably worse health than other children. Our findings also present serious implications for pediatricians by suggesting that foster care placement is a risk factor for health problems in childhood."

Published online Oct. 17 (Eastern time) ahead of print in *Pediatrics*, the large-scale study is the first to offer health comparisons based on a nationally representative sample of U.S. children. Turney and co-author Christopher Wildeman, associate professor of policy analysis & management at Cornell University, analyzed data from the 2011-2012 National Survey of Children's Health. Of the more than 900,000 kids included in the survey, 1.3 percent were identified as having been in foster care.

They were compared to children who hadn't spent time in foster care,

those who had been adopted from foster care and those living in a variety of family arrangements, including single-mother and economically disadvantaged households. Using logistic regression models, researchers found that kids who'd been in foster care were:

- Seven times as likely to experience depression
- Six times as likely to exhibit behavioral problems
- Five times as likely to feel anxiety
- Three times as likely to have attention deficit disorder, hearing impairments and vision issues
- Twice as likely to suffer from learning disabilities, developmental delays, asthma, obesity and speech problems

"This is typically a difficult-to-reach population, so having access to descriptive statistics on their living arrangements, physical well-being and behavior provided an excellent opportunity to help identify the health challenges they face," Turney said. "This study expands our understanding of the mental and physical health of these highly vulnerable children, but we must take a closer look if we are to understand how [foster care](#) really affects child well-being."

Provided by University of California, Irvine

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